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"RUS": A Modern Russian Folk Tale

In 1921 Boris Mixajlovič Kustodiev painted a series of twenty-three watercolors for I. I. Brodskij. Rather pleased with the results, the artist contacted the Akvilon Publishing House in February 1922 with a proposal to print the twenty-three in book form along with two others specially designed for the work. The publishing house, in turn, contacted Evgenij Zamjatin to write an introduction to the pictures which were entitled "Russkie tipy." Thus, at the start, there was no direct contact between Zamjatin and Kustodiev, although Zamjatin admits to having been earlier struck by one of Kustodiev's paintings.¹ After the submission of his contribution Zamjatin was invited to the artist's home, the first of many meetings which developed into a warm friendship and close collaboration on a number of projects. In June of that year, for example, Kustodiev exchanged roles, as it were, with Zamjatin, and this time he painted a set of forty watercolors for Zamjatin's short story "Kak iscelen byl inok Erasm." One of their better known joint ventures was their work on Leskov's "Levša" entitled "Bloxā." The adaptation for the stage was done by Zamjatin and the costumes and sets were created by Kustodiev for performance at MXAT II. Later the artist would design entirely new sets and costumes for the Leningrad production. The request to provide a commentary for a series of paintings presented Zamjatin with several major artistic questions. This was, after all, a reversal of the normal sequence wherein a writer's story serves as the basis of an illustrator. Zamjatin himself wondered:

What was I to write about? Kustodiev's painting technique? Others could do it better. I wrote no article, but did something else: I simply spread out before me all those Kustodiev beauties, coachman, merchants innkeepers, nuns. I looked at them as I had once looked at his painting at the exhibition, and the story "In Old Russia" somehow wrote itself.²

Zamjatin's disclaimer notwithstanding, "Rus" is a carefully constructed prose narrative, in which the author reconciled a number of competing interests. On the one hand there was the question of faithfulness to Kustodiev's paintings. How was Zamjatin to reconcile his own vision of Russia with that of Kustodiev? At the same time there was a need to remain true to his own artistic

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Weltanschauung, so rich in modernist irony. One measure of Zamjatin's success in combining the Rus' of Kustodiev with that of his own is the fact that the story has continued even when separated from the pictures.³

Kustodiev's particular style is easily recognizable. Almost all of his art, and especially these watercolors, is marked by an abundance of bright color, in healthy, happy, cheery scenes. His contemporaries noted similar characteristics. Čaljamin commented:

I have known many interesting, talented people, but never one of such noble heart. All cultured people know what a fine artist he was. All know his amazingly colorful Russia with her tinkling bells and Shrove-tide festivities. His fair shows, merchants, tradewomen, plump belles, and dashing youths, generally, all the Russian types he created out of his boyhood reminiscences radiate enheartening delight. Only his fantastic love for Russia could impart such gay punch to his drawing and such mouth-watering juiciness to his colouring in his endless portrayal of Russia.⁴

Repin spoke of the "independence, the originality and the profoundly felt national spirit" of Kustodiev's work.⁵ Zamjatin himself recognized the gulf which separated the two artists: "Kustodiev saw the old Russian with different eyes, far milder and kinder than mine." How was he to capture "winter, snow, trees, snowdrifts, sleighs, ruddy-cheeked Russian gaiety—Kustodiev's colorful old Russia"?⁶ One need only recall "Peščera" or "Mamaj" to realize how inappropriate the gloomy mood of Zamjatin, the ironist, was in this case. To capture this Russian spirit, to create the Rus' of old, became Zamjatin's primary task. To do so he turned to his own forte, Russian prose—the result was the story "Rus'."

"Rus'" is the story of Dar'ja Ivanovna (Marfa Ivanovna in the first edition), orphaned when her parents' drunken horses drag them through a crack in the ice of a frozen river. Dar'ja is entrusted to her aunt Felicata, a nun, who encourages her charge to take a husband from among the merchants in town—in particular Sazykin and Vaxrameev, both old enough to be her father. Dar'ja draws lots and selects the name of Vaxrameev.

The wedding is followed by a whirlwind of winter events including a visit to the carnival with its carousel and balloon men. There are also ritual trips to the *banja* after which the coachman Pantalej delivers them back home. But the tedium of Russian winter is felt to be too restraining and Dar'ja's breasts fill and ripen like apples as April and Easter pass into May. Bursting at the seams of her marriage, she is tempted to purchase a kerchief from a "kazanskij knjaz" because as he says: "kavaler ljubit' budet." Indeed we are led to believe that Dar'ja liberates herself not only from her vows but from her husband, who passes away a few days later. Some say it was a poisonous mushroom, but all sorts of tales encircle Petrov, the trunk maker and the village chronicler.

Dar'ja marries again, presumably her unnamed lover.⁷ After the new marriage, Sazykin sets off in grief to Siberia, but mostly life goes on for the simple waiters with their tassels, those who frequent the *traktiry*, and the wanderers along the paths of Rus'.

The plot described above is relatively straightforward and simple. By including in the narrative details from more than twenty of the pictures, Zamjatin effectively captures and combines elements of Kustodiev's celebration of life with his own ironic twist which celebrates Dar'ja's bursting sensuality at the expense of her husband's life. In the fabric, the weaving of words, images and events, in the *sjuzet*, the author succeeds in recreating the life of the folk who make up Rus', while still maintaining his own unique artistic vision.

The means of achieving this combination and the design of the story are revealed by the author in his lyrical introduction in which he mentions *skazka* and *skazočnik*. Zamjatin becomes like the *skazočnik* of old who drew upon a range of materials in order to make a new living creation.⁸ It is as if Kustodiev had provided the raw material, which now remains to be manipulated by the narrator. Zamjatin employs a framework of stylistic and structural devices familiar to students of Russian folklore, which at least recall if not imitate the characteristic elements of the *skazka*.

The original fairy tales were relegated to a distant, mythical realm, the formulaic "V nekotom carstve, v nekotom gosudarstve . . ."⁹ The modern narrator, aware of this convention, creates a fairy land for his updated folk tale. He thus observes the old convention in new form. This modern day land is Rus'—its narrow streets in sharp contrast to the measured prospects of Petersburg and Rossija. This Rus' has the timelessness of Dmitrij Donskoj, but it is also a present day world in which reigns a Russian beauty.

A deliberate effort is made to observe other classical structural devices such as *troičnost'*. One can speak of three sections of the story, and of three subdivisions within the major narrative. Likewise, Dar'ja's life could be divided into three components. She has three men in her life: Vazrameev, Sazykin and the lover. Sentence structure often contains tri-partite structures: "i Dar'ja—kruglaja, krupičataja, belaja. Na solnce gudjat pčely, i paxnet—ne to medom, ne to jablokom, ne to Dar'ej."¹⁰

Other elements of the oral tradition in Russia also abound, e.g., stock epithets. Dar'ja is repeatedly likened to a ripening apple, waiting to be plucked. Her lover is characterized by coal-black gypsy eyes. There are elements of the fantastic. Sazykin discovers a wad of bank notes in the belly of a fish. The parents' horses are not horses but tigers. Traditional classical elements such as the obligatory passing away of the parents are observed. Folk symbols abound: the egg of fertility, the repeated references to apples, bees and honey. There is also the whirlpool, legendary home of the *rusalki*.

Another major aspect of the story is the inclusion of numerous folk rites and rituals—elements which capture the essence of old Rus'. There are the

gadanje, divining to select a husband, and visits to the *banja* with all of its associations. Time is marked not by months but by ritual events: *Kreščenske morozy*, *Maslenica*, *Pasxa* and the *Devičij prazdnik* in *rusal'naja nedelja*—about which more will be said shortly.

The regular and consistent merging of pagan and Christian beliefs and rituals, characteristic of Russian folklore, provides the author with an additional literary device to employ in the construction of his tale. As he will later do in *My Zamjatin* turns to myth as one bearer of meaning in his work.¹¹ The Christian calendar has already been introduced as a motif. But there is more. Dar'ja is tempted by her young lover who comes delivering apples—the “*zakušennoe jabloko*.” This reference to Genesis is supported by another which refers to the conjugal bed as the ark. Zamjatin highlights the presence of myth with his inclusion of another biblical reference in revisions of the work. Compare the following sentences:

В городе Кустодиеве прогуляйтесь— (1922 edition, p. 11)

В городе Кустодиеве (есть даже Каинснк—неужто Кустодиева нету?) прогуляйтесь— (1963 edition, p. 158)

It is myth which helps bridge the gap between the sacred and the profane, and between the pictorial art of Kustodiev and Zamjatin's verbal art. If the images of old Rus' are created from the vision of Kustodiev, then the verbal texture, the *literaturnost'* of the text, is purely that of Zamjatin. Even as he recalls the fairytale and refers to the *skazočnik*, Zamjatin points not to the old fairytale, but rather a new folktale which will preserve the happenings of today for tomorrow's audience.

If the artifice is found in the *sjuzet*, Zamjatin's art emerges primarily in his own creation, the *fabula*. Here the elements taken from Kustodiev's paintings are merged into a new literary creation. The narrative relies heavily on the one element missing in pictorial art—time. The pine forest introduced in the prologue observes two major seasons—winter and summer. The story corresponds to this division and marks times not in days or months, but according to folk rituals. The first time reference is to *Maslenica*, equivalent to Carnival in the West, when Dar'ja's parents perish. The Slavic ritual focuses on two days—one relating to death, the other to life. “V Rossii Maslenica načinaetsja posle vselenskoj subboty, v kotoruju byvaet pamjat' usopšix rodstvennikov meždu tem, kak v syrnuju nedelju cerkov' naša vospominaet izgnanie Adama iz raja, progotovlaja Xristian k Velikomu postu.”¹² The high point of the festivities is the Thursday evening, *Razgul* or *Širokaja Maslenica*. The week ends with the mock burial of Maslenica, the symbolic entombment of winter. Thus Carnival plays an intermediary role in the Slavic year joining life and death: “kak prazdnovanie pobedy vesny nad zimoi, žizni nad smert'ju.”¹³ Similarly the death of Dar'ja's parents liberates her for a life of her own. Dar'ja seems particularly in tune with nature—she ripens as do the apples and comes of

age along with the bees, which according to legend arrived after the fifteenth of April.

The second part of the story corresponding to Dar'ja's married life opens in winter. The first reference is to the *Kreščenske morozy*, the final day in the midwinter celebration of the rebirth of the sun. The depiction of Dar'ja's marital state as one of restriction and constraint indicates the death of her maiden spirit. As time progresses toward Easter, the possibility of resurrection is symbolized in the exchange of an Easter egg, which gives rise to Dar'ja's infidelity.

The third section of the narrative concentrates on the strange and mysterious night:

Но ведь говорят старые люди, будто раз в году, когда в мае новый месяц уродится и ночь темна, — раз в году даже всем деревьям, цветам и травам, всем зеленым душам—дозволено ходить, чтобы к утру опять вернуться на место (p. 163).

On this same evening in May Dar'ja surrenders to the advances of her lover and within a few days she has administered the poisonous mushroom to her husband. This strange night of decision is presumably the *devičij prazdnik* sometimes called *Semik* in *Trojsko-semiskaja nedelja* or *rusal'naja nedelja*. On this seventh Thursday after Easter, the *rusalki*, the legendary water nymphs, emerge from their whirlpools to entertain themselves with mischievous deeds at the expense of the male population. Dar'ja's infidelity and murderous designs ally her with these water nymphs.

It is in Dar'ja that all of the elements of the story come together. Just as she is the central figure in Kustodiev's collection, so too is she the representative of nature's cycles and the embodiment of the main color symbolism in the work. She is marked by two major colors: the red of the apple, which is constantly referred to, as are the red tongues of fire which eventually consume the pine forest; and the gold of the field of grain which will cover the burnt ground. Both of these colors are combined in the Easter egg to symbolize her own fertility and serve as a signal to her lover. These are in stark contrast to the blue and gray dullness of winter and married life.

One other distinguishing element in the modern folk tale is Zamjatin's use of irony. This is, in fact, an essential aspect of his prose and the one which insures his artistic independence from Kustodiev. The husband Vaxrameev chides Sazykin on the way to the *banja*, but fails to notice the more immediate threat posed by others to his married life. Vaxrameev will die from a mushroom earlier described in the lyrical eulogy to the forest, of which he is the prime representative. His final days are marked by a touch of verbal irony. As he returns home to his now unfaithful wife, Vaxrameev notes a change in her: “Ty čto, Dar'ja? Ili muxu s kvasom nevznačaj proglotila?” (p. 163). But it is nor Dar'ja who has swallowed the fly—it's Vaxrameev who will die. Even in

his last words to her he is blind to the truth. "Ne vychodi,—govorit,— za Sazykina. On mne v Makar'evu muku podmočennuju vsučil." The next line reads: "Pogubila Sazykina muka" (p. 163). But whether it was the flour, *múka*, or torment, *muká*, which doomed Sazykin even the reader may never discover.

"Rus'" is not, as Alex Shane maintains, a "eulogy to Old Russia."¹⁴ Rather it is a celebration of life and a successful attempt to capture and preserve artistically that Old Russia. The real miracle is how Zamjatin, in drawing on the work of another, remains true to his own personal artistic vision. The overlaid myth and irony in the story are elements foreign to Kustodiev's art. But never do they intrude; rather they complement the primary reading of Russian life at its fullest.

Just as Kustodiev had drawn his inspiration from people to create an *iskusstvo*, an art of the folk, rather than a pure folk art, so too did Zamjatin present us not with a fairy tale, a *skazka*, but a folk tale, a tale of the Russian people as he saw them. In Zamjatin's words: "And so it came about that Kustodiev's old Russia and mine could now be painted on canvas and paper in the same colors."¹⁵

NOTES

1. "Meetings With Kustodiev" in *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamiatin*, ed. and trans. by Mirra Ginsburg (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970), p. 231.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 232.

3. The story first appeared in *Rus'* (Petrograd: Akvilon, 1923). It was later reprinted in *Nečestivye rasskazy* (Moscow: Krug, 1927); *Sever: povesti, rasskazy, skazki* (Moscow: Feberacija, 1929) and in *Povesti i rasskazy* (Munich: 1963).

4. Quoted in introduction by S. Kaplanova to *Boris Mikhailovich Kustodiev: An Album* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1971), p. 16.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6. "Meetings with Kustodiev," p. 231.

7. Alex Shane, *The Life and Works of Evgenij Zamiatin* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), p. 169. "Dar'ja, ripe for marriage, selects old Vaxramej [sic] as her husband, takes his virile coachman Pantalej as a lover, and then poisons Vaxramej and marries Pantalej." I have searched the story in vain for any clear cut evidence that Pantalej is the lover. In the first version Pantalej is described as the driver of coach number 15, a direct reference to one of the drawings. In later versions the number of the coach has been removed.

8. Ju. M. Sokolov, *Russkij fol'klor* (Moscow: 1941), pp. 308, ff.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 328.

10. "Rus'" in *Povesti i rasskazy*. All page references are to this edition, which is more readily available in the West.

11. See article by Christopher Collins, "Zamjatin's *We* as Myth," *Slavic and East European Journal*, X, No. 2 (Summer 1966), 125-33.

12. M. Zabylin, *Russkij narod, ego obyčai, obrjady, predanija i poèzija* (Moscow: 1880), p. 35.

13. N. I. Kravcov, *Russkoe narodnoe poètičeskoe tvorčestvo* (Moscow: 1971), p. 45.

14. Shane, p. 171.

15. "Meetings With Kustodiev," pp. 231-32;